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The Place of Social Democracy
in the Argentine Political System

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THE PLACE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN THE ARGENTINE POLITICAL SYSTEM

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In recent years, the concept of social democracy has gained wide currency among Argentine political elites. After years of contempt, important sectors representing the Radical and Peronista parties, as well as the Left and the intelligentsia, accept this type of ideological identification. This merits some exploration of the historical roots of the social-democratic experience in Argentina and its place in the political party spectrum in the years to come.

Social democracy in Europe was an adaptation of the values of socialism (a universal religion) to the specific conditions of each country. The organized working class soon adopted the ideology, which faced little competition from other well-entrenched political loyalties. The liberal, radical, or Social Christian convictions of some popular sectors were, in a sense, remains of an earlier period, which never became a strongly rooted alternative expression for working-class interests. This is in contrast to what happens in the United States and in many Third World countries. Leaving aside the very special case of the United States, in many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, some form of populism or radical nationalism successfully competes with socialism, often adorning itself with socialist ideology or tradition. The case of *peronismo* in Argentina is one of the better-known examples.

At the inception of the socialist ideology, Latin American conditions were not ripe for autonomous action by the working class. In fact, conditions were scarcely adequate for consolidating a capitalist bourgeoisie. However, there already existed a tradition and an experience of popular rebellion, from Túpac Amaru to the Mexican Insurgencia and the slave rebellion in Haiti. These rebellions included *caudillista* movements, some of which were quite radical, like *artiguismo*; others, like *rosismo*, were more conservative, although no less successful at mobilizing the masses. In Europe, comparable events were part of a tradition of popular struggles that socialism later incorporated. This is particularly the case of the French Revolution; although the bourgeoisie capitalized on it, its most radical aspects became antecedents of socialist ideology. In other words, socialism is in many ways a meditation on the French Revolution and on the subsequent revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871. The popular rebellions and *caudillista* movements in Latin America, in contrast, are relatively devoid of ideological interpreters, and they have not been incorporated into the corpus of a theoretical structure with any pretension of universal validity. For example, the insurgents of the 1810 Mexican rebellion are a part of the Mexican pantheon, but they are hardly known or taken seriously in the rest of the continent. The same applies to the other cases mentioned, which may be celebrated by patriotic nationalism, but never became part of a universalist narrative with theoretical or ideological value.

